

LAJOS KOSSUTH IN HUNGARIAN FOLK NARRATIVES

The 19th century was the period that saw the birth of the European nations, when new ideals and new ideal heroes were needed for the legitimisation of the political aspirations, values and laws. Napoleon was the first of these national heroes; later the European revolutions created their own heroes. The great figures of the Hungarian nation too struggled in the 1848/49 Hungarian revolution and war of independence: István Széchenyi, Lajos Kossuth, Sándor Petőfi, the 13 generals executed at Arad, who all became national heroes during the struggles for freedom or instantly following the defeat of the war of independence.

A common feature in the biographies of national heroes is that the hero always appears on the scene in difficult times – in a period of revolution, or war – to help his people. Signs predicting his birth can be seen or are expected. They foretell his future great deeds. He goes through physical and mental trials that could be regarded as an “initiation”, that make it clear he is a chosen one. His personal fate is intertwined with that of the nation, he puts his mission before his family life, defends and struggles for his goal to the end. If he fails, he dies for a nation, for an ideal. He may become a national symbol already in his lifetime.¹

This life career model can be seen in the life history of Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894), the great 19th century Hungarian statesman and intellectual leader of the Hungarian freedom struggles. His biographies, from contemporary biographies right up to today’s school textbooks stress precisely these aspects. Kossuth, a man with origins in the minor nobility, wins election to the Hungarian feudal Diet as a representative of absentee aristocrats. He takes a stand as spokesman for the ideals of Hungarian freedom, he is imprisoned for his political role and comes out strengthened in body and soul. He leads the revolution, recruits an army, fails, is forced into exile from where he continues to organise the resistance, makes a new attempt to launch the struggle, retires, but throughout his life and even after his death his people await his return.

Up to 1848 Lajos Kossuth was known in a relatively small circle of Hungarian society, to the nobility involved in politics; he became known throughout the country in 1848 when he took the lead of the Hungarian freedom movement and later of the struggle to defend the country. His tour of the Great Plain to gather recruits in the autumn of 1848 when he visited all the larger settlements played a big part in this.² Many people have written about the events of that tour,³ and

1 Cf. Sokolewicz 1991: 125–136.

2 Barta 1952a: 26.

3 Cf. *Alföldi Hírlap*, 1848. október 22.; Egressi 1848. IX. 29.; Gracza n. d. [1903]: 240; Jókai 1868: 102–105.

there are many known portrayals.⁴ Wherever he went his audience was made up largely of agricultural workers, farmers and merchants of the market towns. Historical research shows that his recruiting tour had very little influence from the military point of view; in reality the army was formed from conscripts.⁵ It was much rather the political and psychological impact of his tour that was of inestimable value. This was the first time the peasants were able to see the man they regarded as their “liberator”, whose name was associated with the abolition of villeinage. Numerous measures intended to assist the process of embourgeoisement, among them the abolition of villeinage, the most serious burden afflicting the serfs, had been introduced in laws signed by the emperor in April 1848. Kossuth had played a leading role in the drafting and adoption of these “April laws”. The majority of those interviewed by ethnographers collecting material in the 20th century stated, when asked about Kossuth, that he liberated the serfs and abolished villein service for the lords.⁶

Kossuth’s appearance, his charisma and speaking skills predestined him to arouse the attention of his listeners, in many cases also their enthusiasm and even adulation.⁷ Many of the statues of Kossuth portray him making a speech to the people of the Great Plain; among others the Kossuth statue in New York also recorded this scene. Kossuth’s speeches on the Great Plain made him better known and popular, but it was during his years in exile that his fame reached its peak.

Because of the failure of the Hungarian freedom struggle Kossuth was forced to flee in August 1849. Practically from the moment Kossuth had to leave the country the Hungarians awaited his return.⁸ They began to hope for his return especially after the defeat of the Austrians at Solferino in 1859, when Garibaldi and his Red Shirts launched the struggle for the unification of Italy. Kossuth never succeeded in returning to Hungary in his lifetime. He died in exile in Torino in 1894. His body was brought back to Hungary and the Hungarian nation bade farewell to the great man with pomp and dignified ceremonies.⁹ All this left its imprint in folklore; many stories are known about his death, the return of his coffin, his funeral and of how people still hoped for his return even after his death.¹⁰

Even before his exile Kossuth was given the honorary title of “the Hungarians’ Moses”. An anecdote about the origin of this title is known in many variants. According to this when Kossuth arrived in Debrecen on 6 January 1849 with the government and members of parliament who had fled from Pest, the commander of the guard made the following entry in the guest book at the town gate: “At two o’clock this afternoon, Lajos Kossuth, »the Hungarians’ Moses« arrived with his family”.¹¹

4 Körmöczi 1994: 379–380.

5 Barta 1952b: 149–166; Szabad 1977: 143; Deák 1983: 187.

6 Landgraf 2004: 353–363.

7 Barta 1952b: 149–166; Deák 1983: 187; Szabad 1977: 143; Hermann 1994: 81–82.

8 *Budapesti Hírlap*, 1894. március 21. 11.

9 Gerő 2004: 53–78.

10 Gyoma, Bereczki 1947a: EA/2036; Dévaványa, Bereczki 1947b: EA 2037/353; Szászfa: Irányi 1947: EA 2112/296; Nádudvar: Aukner–Emőd 1947: EA 2065/80.

11 Szűcs 1989: 176.

After the defeat of the war of independence many people preserved the banknotes issued in 1848–49 when Kossuth was minister of finance, known as Kossuth-notes even though possession of them could result in serious punishment.¹² During ethnological collections a hundred years later this was the material relic of 1848 most widely found, preserved by families for generations.

Already Kossuth's contemporaries noticed how many songs included his name.¹³ In 1867 the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary settled their political, legal and economic relations. Under the agreement reached the Austrian emperor was crowned king of Hungary as Franz Joseph I, who gave his approval for the Hungarian laws under the agreement, resulting in the birth of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. After this, censorship was slightly relaxed.¹⁴ In publications that appeared before 1867 the songs of the war of independence could be included only with substantial cuts.¹⁵ Strong punishment was imposed even for singing the so-called "Kossuth song".¹⁶ The song had been published in newspapers in 1848 as a recruiting song. It quickly became popular in the Hungarian-speaking territories and has remained well known right up to the present. Right from the start the Kossuth song occupied a prominent place in the Kossuth traditions. For example, after 1867, those who published their reminiscences of the revolution in the newspapers always cited one or two lines from the Kossuth song,¹⁷ and it was also frequently sung at political demonstrations around the time of the change of political system in Hungary after 1899.

After the Austro-Hungarian political compromise of 1867 it became possible within certain limits to cultivate memories of the freedom struggle. A selection of revolutionary poetry was published¹⁸ extracts from Kossuth's main works appeared,¹⁹ and one year after the coronation of Franz Joseph a Kossuth album was also published.²⁰ After 1867 cheap booklets of "songs of revolutionary times" were published and the opposition newspapers also devoted space to them. Already in 1868 it was proposed that the songs of the freedom struggle should be collected and published.²¹

A national ethnological collection of relics of the 1848/49 revolution and war of independence was made in 1948, the centenary year. The aim of the collecting was to explore the form in which the ideals, heroes and events of the struggle for freedom lived on in Hungarian popular awareness a hundred years after the events, what people thought and what they knew about 1848/49. The aim was not so much to examine the genres of historical popular poetry, but rather the imprint

12 Cf. Gerő 1988: 73.

13 Cf. Ujváry 1995: 100.

14 Tóth K. 1894: 194–195.

15 E.g. Mátray 1852–58; Szini 1865.

16 Dégh 1952a: 19–23.

17 [R. S.] 1873: 234–236.; Kossuth Emléklap 1889; Tóth K. 1894: 194–195.; *Vasárnapi Újság*, 12. 1894. március 25 – április 15; Kossuth apánk [1902].

18 Áldor n. d.; Áldor 1867.

19 Áldor 1870; Áldor 1871.

20 Áldor–Ormodi 1868.

21 *Magyar Ujság* 1868: (február 15.) 150. cf. Dégh 1952b: 22–23.

left by the events two or three generations later.²² The political atmosphere of the period can be felt in the way the goals of the major collecting campaign were formulated. 1948 was what became known as the “turning-point year” in Hungary, the time of the communist take-over of power and the beginning of the establishment of communist dictatorship.

The collecting work resulted in a vast amount of manuscript material as the work was carried out by close to six hundred persons from collecting points within the boundaries of present-day Hungary. These points were selected for their proximity to renowned places and battlefields of the war of independence. Ten persons were interviewed in each settlement chosen. The collectors sought traces of events of the revolution and war of independence, the big battles and Kossuth’s recruiting tour, both in the remembrance of descendants and in tangible relics. The collecting work was carried out by ethnologists, university students of ethnology and volunteer ethnological collectors. The period following the war of independence was actually experienced history for some of the interviewees, but for the majority it was the time of their fathers and grandfathers. The material collected contained a great deal of anecdotes and relatively few linguistically polished, refined legend texts. Not only the heroes of the revolution and war of independence appear in the stories (such as Lajos Kossuth, János Damjanich, Mór Perczel, Sándor Petőfi, Mihály Táncsics, József Bem, Artúr Görgei, György Klapka, Henryk Dembiński, Lajos Batthyány, Sándor József Nagy, and their adversaries Josip Jelačić, Ödön Zichy, Julius Jacob von Haynau), but also other great figures of the period, poets and writers (Ferenc Kölcsey, Mihály Vörösmarty, Mihály Tompa, János Arany, Mór Jókai), politicians (Ferenc Deák, Mihály Táncsics, Miklós Wesselényi, Ferenc Kossuth), as well as a good few outlaws and local heroes.

The organisers of the collecting had the preconception that Lajos Kossuth was the “leading figure of the struggle for freedom”, and this fact would also be reflected in folk tradition. All the informants were asked: “Who was Lajos Kossuth?” There were innumerable communications related to Kossuth even within a single collecting manuscript. In an article written in 1952, Gyula Ortutay – a well-known Hungarian ethnologist and left-wing politician, minister for religious affairs and education from 1947–50 – summed up the results and lessons of the collecting project. He stressed that it confirmed what the organisers had thought, namely that in the people’s eyes Kossuth rose far above the other freedom fighters.²³ A selection of the material collected was published, but exclusively with texts that confirmed this conception. In 1998, the 150th anniversary of the events, a selection was published representing the whole of the material collected. In several studies I have attempted to make a realistic, professional evaluation of the 1948 collection.²⁴ The manuscript collection preserved in the Ethnological Archive of the Museum of Ethnography is a rich storehouse of folklore related to the revolution

²² Dégh n.d.: 230.

²³ Ortutay 1952: 263–307.

²⁴ E. g. Landgraf 1998; Landgraf 2004;

and war of independence. The conclusions that can be drawn from the material are much more complex than the picture given by Gyula Ortutay in his overview.

The majority of those interviewed during the 1848 centenary ethnological collecting said in connection with Lajos Kossuth that: *He liberated the serfs,²⁵ abolished the tithe,²⁶ ended villein service,²⁷ distributed land, and even liberated the whole world.²⁸ In cases the informants expressed this in such practical terms as he wanted to introduce free distilling and freedom to sell meat.²⁹ "[...] Kossuth made things so that people didn't have to go and plough for the lord. So then they stopped going for forced labour."*³⁰

It was almost as often stated that *he directed the war of independence*. He wasn't a soldier, but he was the leader. Many of the interviewees spoke of him as a *king*.³¹ Many emphasised that *the people loved him*,³² proof of this was that they addressed him as our father Kossuth. The commemorative albums that appeared after 1867 in honour of Kossuth often also called him "our father Kossuth".³³

When we look for episodes of his life history in the folklore, we find that a number of informants mentioned in connection with his birth that: *he was born with en-caul* (with an intact amniotic sac) a sign foretelling his historical mission.³⁴ This was in fact true, Kossuth himself referred to it a number of times, and it has been mentioned a few times in biographies. The uncertainties around the place where he was christened appear as a local legend in Tállya and its vicinity. This memory is also reinforced by the placing of a memorial tablet recalling his christening in the church in Tállya.³⁵

The influence of written culture and popular reading matter can be seen in the stories collected on *the time he spent in prison*, and on life in prison.³⁶

I have already mentioned Kossuth's recruiting tour on the Great Plain. The memory of *Kossuth as recruiter* is also preserved in oral traditions. "The soldiers joined up to Kossuth voluntarily."³⁷ "They willingly fought beside him. He did not even have to recruit."³⁸ "Kossuth himself came here recruiting..."³⁹ The sight of a Kossuth statue inspired the following memorate: "[...] when the Hungarian world came to an end, Kossuth passed through Ványa too. He was leaving the

25 Böde, Sztankovszky 1947: EA 2060/38; Pilisszentkereszt, Varró 1947: EA 2046/11, 14, 17; Szászfalva, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/295, 298; Hochstrasser 1947: EA 2110/153; Szentlőrinc, Németh 1947: 37, 39, 104.; Tiszafüred, Nagy-Németh 1947: EA 2119/25.

26 Bakonybél, Pesovár 1947a: EA 2114/21.

27 Meszes, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/19.

28 Técsenfa, Réthey Prikkel 1947: EA 2044/3, 54.

29 Békés, Ligeti 1947: EA 2061/98.

30 Felsőgaly, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/275.

31 Gyöngyöspata, Luttor 1947: EA 2059/77; Gönc, Kozma 1947: EA 2080/8; Szúpaták, Pesovár 1947b: 2113/191.

32 Gyoma, Ligeti 1947: EA 2061/36.

33 Kossuth apánk [1902].

34 Tállya, Juhár 1947: EA 2054/11.

35 Tállya, Juhár 1947: EA 2054/10; Meszes, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/282.

36 Meszes, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/297.

37 Szalonna, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/277.

38 Szalonna, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/285.

39 Mór, Hegyi 1947: EA 2070/19.

country. It was terribly sad. He made a speech in the market place. He held up a finger as he spoke."⁴⁰

The life of *Kossuth in exile* is also a frequent theme of folklore stories.⁴¹ Many people spoke about his long exile, about how the king would not allow him to return. The newspapers,⁴² almanacs,⁴³ commemorative albums⁴⁴ and collections of anecdotes all dealt in detail with the successes of Kossuth's tours in Europe and America and of his enthusiastic reception.⁴⁵ The informants summed this up by saying that *he was loved and respected abroad too*.⁴⁶ In the words of a farmer from Gyoma in 1947:

"Kossuth spoke in very good English when he went over to New York or where it was he spoke to the people. They kept slaves there in those days. A grand American gentleman came in a carriage pulled by 4–5 negro slaves to hear Kossuth speak. Kossuth, of course, saw this, and said:

– Look here, why do you do this, even if their skin is black they are just people like us!

So he liberated the blacks. Every black man there has a picture of Kossuth in his home. They respect him more than we do."⁴⁷

In a great number of the texts collected either a parallel is drawn between Lajos Kossuth and Franz Joseph or they are contrasted. "Franz Joseph is dead, happiness is lost; Lajos Kossuth is dead, justice is lost!"⁴⁸ A frequently occurring communication in the Kossuth traditions is that Kossuth abolished the villein service,⁴⁹ but in the ethnological collecting on the centenary of 1848 interviewees attributed this to Franz Joseph with almost the same frequency. ("When Franz Joseph became king, the people had everything they needed under his rule. He liberated the serfs too."⁵⁰) And not only in folklore stories but also in songs Kossuth's name was replaced with that of Franz Joseph, at times even in the Kossuth song. But this should not be attributed solely to the efficiency of censorship or the Viennese court propaganda. Although there is no doubt that the anti-war of independence, pro-imperial writings and articles in cheap popular publications stated that it was not Kossuth but Franz Joseph who liberated the serfs.⁵¹ Later, at the time of the First World War objects appearing with the king's portrait also popularised the ruler of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Soldiers' commemorative

40 Dévaványa: Bereczki 1947b: EA 2037/48.

41 Cf. Rakaca, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/306; Szalonna, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/286; Kalocsa, Solymos 1947: EA 2077/6. Tiszaszöllös, Nagy–Németh 1947: EA 2119/100.

42 Szabad 1977: 189–199.

43 E. g. Debreceni Képes Kalendárium, 1902: 70–71.

44 Kohányi n. d.

45 Tóth B. 1888–1903/III: 263–265, 265–266.

46 Szászfa, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/302; Felsőgaly, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/274; Kunhegyes, Aukner–Emőd 1947: EA 2065/225; Kunhegyes, Aukner–Emőd 1947: EA 2065/225; Gyoma, Ligeti 1947: EA 2061/36; Tiszanána, Aukner–Emőd 1947: EA 2065/662.

47 Gyoma, Ligeti 1947: EA 2061/16–17. Cf. Hermann 1994: 115.

48 Bakta, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/ 42.

49 Landgraf 2004: 359.

50 Tállya, Juhár 1947: EA2054/ 22.

51 Deák 1983: 348.

certificates, war-time oleographs, wall hangings, plates and mugs bearing the portrait of Franz Joseph were mass-produced and sold cheaply, so that they also reached peasant homes, strengthening the image of the *people's good father and good king*.⁵² The booklets of printed scores published during the First World War (such as *National and Battle Songs of the Monarchy and Germany* with a coloured cover) had portraits of Franz Joseph and Kaiser Wilhelm on the title-page and contained a number of originally 1848 song texts in which Kossuth's name was replaced with that of the king.

After 1867, and especially by the time of the First World War the image of Franz Joseph in both popular and folk culture began to change. The judgement of the ageing Austrian emperor and Hungarian king who had suffered many blows and lost many family members became much more favourable. The figure of Franz Joseph in the role of "father of the Hungarian people" gradually became intertwined with that of Lajos Kossuth.⁵³

Compared with the wealth of oral traditions associated with the name of Lajos Kossuth, there were relatively few stories that became shaped into historical legend. A good few of these are well known legend types linked to other historical figures. For example, a typical type from the King Matthias legends about making the lords hoe the fields⁵⁴ or the sprouting of a stick (used in herding animals) as a symbol of his coming election as king.

"Kossuth went out to the workers on the hill. The lords were drinking wine in the shade. Then he told them to go and hoe. And they did, but they couldn't stand the work. So Kossuth took away their wealth and gave it to the workers."⁵⁵

"Kossuth was the king. He was a poor servant boy. He was ploughing with a man called János. It was at the time they were electing a king. The boy stuck 100 sticks in the ground and said: I will be king when these sticks shoot. They did shoot. He became King Kossuth."⁵⁶

Two typical motifs of the outlaw legends – *escaping with reversed horseshoes*⁵⁷ and *invulnerability*⁵⁸ – both occur in association with Kossuth too. A separate type of Kossuth stories explains the changes and the granting of freedom as the result of *an agreement between Kossuth and the king*.⁵⁹ The most frequently occurring Kossuth story in the 1948 collection tells how *Kossuth takes over guard duty from a shivering sentry*.⁶⁰ The story was also popularised in the collections of anecdotes published by György Gracza, Béla Tóth and Ernő Szűcs.⁶¹ It is a genre characteristic of the historical legend that the same historical figure may appear as either a

52 Landgraf 2007: 293–311; Kovács Á. 1985; 1987.

53 Landgraf 2005: 127–140.

54 Dömötör 1998: 45.

55 Bogdánd, Bereczki 1947c: EA 2040/16.

56 Szalonna, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/278.

57 Alsógaly, Irányi 1947: EA 2112/288.

58 Dégh 1952a: 145; Dömötör 1998: 44.

59 Nádudvar, Aukner–Emőd 1947: EA 2065/77; Kaposmérő, Kiss 1947: EA 2097/60.

60 Nagyrév, Hochstrasser 1947: EA 2110/153, 157; Tiszafüred, Nagy–Németh 1947: EA 2119/81.; Dégh 1952a: 44–45.

61 Tóth B. 1888–1903/III: 34–35; Gracza n. d. [1901]: 5–6; Szűcs 1989: 177–178; Dégh 1952a: 58–59.

positive or a negative hero. There is also a type of Kossuth story in which blame is placed on Kossuth. He is accused of *being incapable of reaching agreement, of causing many deaths*, but most frequently of *stealing the crown*.⁶² Already during the war of independence the story spread that in the winter of 1848 in Buda Castle, in the company of his ambitious wife Kossuth took the royal jewels, put the Hungarian crown on his head and looking at himself in the mirror, said: "Of, how well it will suit me!"⁶³

At the time of Kossuth's death numerous publications and commemorative albums appeared in his honour with the important function of shaping the image of Kossuth in folklore and popular culture.⁶⁴ A newspaper article published at the time of his death wrote: "[...] the strength of the Kossuth cult among the Hungarian people can best be seen in the firm belief among the people of Avar that the bright red light in the sky was a miracle of nature mourning Kossuth. This conviction is still strong among the people of Arad and vicinity."⁶⁵

If we seek the criteria raised at the beginning of this paper, the characteristic signs of the national hero in the Kossuth traditions, songs, historical legends and memorates, we find a number of them.

His birth was marked by unusual phenomena (birth en-caul, the circumstances of his christening).

He was guided by the ideals of national independence and progress.

He was imprisoned.

He launched and recruited for a war of independence.

He is the object of general affection and respect.

He was forced into exile.

His return is awaited even after his death.

Miraculous signs marked his death.

The purpose of my paper has been to show that the real events of Lajos Kossuth's life, the reports about him (in newspapers, almanacs, commemorative albums, etc.) and the characteristics of the epic heroes of literature and the heroes of folklore stories, historical legends and anecdotes have all contributed to shaping the image of Kossuth in Hungarian folklore.

62 Tésenfa, Réthey Prikkel 1947: EA 2044/55; Dévaványa, Bereczki 1947b: EA 2037/619, 636; Endrőd, Ligeti 1947: EA 2061/69; Cegléd, Cseh 1947: EA 2111/87.

63 Tóth B. 1888–1903/III: 128–129.

64 *Vasárnapi Újság* 1894. március 25., április 1., április 8., április 15. Baksay 1894; Dóczi 1894; Kossuth apánk [1902]; Emlékbeszédek 1903a; Emlékbeszédek 1903b; Kovács D. 1910; Dégh 1952a.

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